



Re-reading the Mahabharata through Contemporary Retellings: Cultural Memory and the Continuity of Indian Knowledge Systems

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Abstract

*The Mahabharata has never really belonged to the past. It persists as a remarkably elastic archive of Indian Knowledge Systems, carrying philosophical inquiry, ethical reflection and cultural memory into ever-changing historical moments. Contemporary retellings are often described as adaptations, yet that description feels a little too limited. They do something more demanding: they reopen the epic, invite fresh acts of interpretation and, in the process, keep its intellectual traditions alive rather than merely preserving them. This paper asks what happens when the Mahabharata is read not as a fixed canonical text but as a continuing conversation across generations. The discussion centres on Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* and Devdutt Pattanaik's *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata*. Through qualitative textual analysis informed by theories of cultural memory alongside concepts drawn from Indian aesthetic traditions, the paper examines the ways these works reconfigure narrative voice, ethical dilemmas and characterisation while remaining deeply engaged with the epic's philosophical core. Divakaruni's revisioning of Draupadi unsettles inherited narrative authority, Pattanaik's interpretive framework invites readers into a layered understanding of myth, history and dharma, and together these texts reveal that the transmission of knowledge is rarely linear. It moves across voices, audiences and historical contexts in ways that are often uneven but deeply productive. At stake here is not simply the survival of an ancient epic. These retellings negotiate the often-uneasy relation between tradition and modernity, showing Indian Knowledge Systems as living intellectual formations rather than static inheritances. They preserve, question and reshape cultural meanings all at once, a process which resists easy categorisation and perhaps should. The argument, then, is that contemporary literary engagements with the Mahabharata function as sites where cultural memory is continually reactivated, revised and carried forward, ensuring that the epic remains an active repository of indigenous knowledge for present readers and, one suspects, future one's as well.*

Keywords: Mahabharata, Indian Knowledge Systems, Cultural Memory, Contemporary Retellings, Indian Literature

1. Introduction

The *Mahabharata* occupies an unusual position in the intellectual and cultural history of South Asia. It is an epic of dynastic conflict, but it is also a sustained engagement with questions of *dharma*, political responsibility, kinship, violence, justice and human conduct. Its extraordinary longevity cannot be explained simply by the survival of an ancient text. Rather, the epic has remained culturally significant because successive generations have continued to interpret, adapt and argue with it. As Alf Hiltebeitel



demonstrates, its complex narrative structure repeatedly turns ethical questions into problems of interpretation rather than offering uncomplicated moral answers (Hiltebeitel, 2001).

This continuing process of interpretation can be considered through the contemporary framework of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS). Although the term IKS is relatively recent as an institutional category, the knowledge traditions it seeks to identify have much deeper histories. Current discussions of IKS emphasise the recovery and engagement of Indian intellectual traditions within contemporary education, including their interdisciplinary and culturally embedded character (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2023). The *Mahabharata* is relevant to this framework because knowledge in the epic is frequently transmitted through narrative, dialogue and ethical conflict rather than through abstract instruction alone.

The epic's continuing life also depends upon its plurality. It has circulated through different linguistic, regional and performative traditions, producing variations in which particular characters and episodes acquire new significance. Its cultural continuity, therefore, does not depend upon remaining unchanged. The history of South Asian epic traditions suggests instead that retelling can itself be a form of preservation: narratives survive because they can be made meaningful within new social and cultural contexts (Ramanujan, 1991; Richman, 1991).

This process becomes particularly visible in contemporary Indian English literature. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) and Devdutt Pattanaik's *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata* (2010) offer two distinct approaches to the inherited epic. Divakaruni re-centres the narrative through Draupadi's first-person perspective, bringing questions of gender, memory and agency to the foreground. Pattanaik takes a more expansive approach, combining the Sanskrit narrative with folk and regional variants, thereby emphasising the plurality of traditions through which the *Mahabharata* has circulated.

This paper argues that these retellings demonstrate how cultural continuity can operate through reinterpretation. Rather than treating them as secondary versions of a fixed original, the study reads them as active sites of cultural memory in which inherited ideas are reconsidered in relation to contemporary concerns. Divakaruni's emphasis on Draupadi's remembered experience and Pattanaik's engagement with multiple narrative traditions reveal two different ways in which the *Mahabharata* continues to function as a living intellectual tradition.

The study consequently examines how retelling becomes a mode of knowledge transmission. By bringing cultural memory and IKS into conversation, it asks not only how the ancient epic is remembered, but also what kinds of knowledge become visible when it is remembered differently.

2. Theoretical Framework: Cultural Memory and Indian Knowledge Systems

The theoretical framework of this study brings together cultural memory and Indian Knowledge Systems in order to understand retelling as a process of transmission rather than simple reproduction. Jan Assmann's concept of cultural memory is particularly useful because it distinguishes the durable forms through which societies relate to a distant past from the everyday memories of living generations (Assmann, 2011). Cultural memory is sustained through texts, rituals, symbols and other forms of collective remembrance; it is consequently not passive preservation but an ongoing process of selecting and reinterpreting the past.



This perspective helps explain the continuing cultural presence of the *Mahabharata*. Its stories have survived not only through written texts but through oral performance, regional traditions, ritual practices and literary adaptations. Aleida Assmann similarly emphasises that cultural memory depends upon processes of preservation and selection, meaning that what a culture remembers is continually shaped by the forms through which remembrance takes place (Assmann, 2011). A contemporary retelling can therefore alter the emphasis of an inherited narrative without abandoning its connection to the past.

IKS provides a complementary framework. Here, the term is used cautiously, not as a claim that all Indian traditions constitute one unified system, but as a broad reference to historically developed modes of intellectual, ethical and cultural inquiry. The *Mahabharata* is especially relevant because it does not sharply separate narrative from reflection. Questions of *dharma*, duty, justice and human responsibility emerge through stories and conflicts, making narrative itself a vehicle for ethical knowledge. Hiltebeitel's reading of the epic similarly stresses its complex processes of education and ethical questioning, particularly through Yudhiṣṭhira's experience (Hiltebeitel, 2001).

The two concepts converge in the idea of continuity through reinterpretation. Cultural memory explains how inherited narratives remain meaningful, while IKS allows us to consider the intellectual and ethical material carried through those narratives. Contemporary retellings consequently become spaces where the past is neither simply preserved nor discarded. It is reworked. This framework will be used to examine how *The Palace of Illusions* and *Jaya* transform the epic while retaining its broader narrative and intellectual inheritance.

3. The *Mahabharata* as a Living Tradition: Retelling, Plurality and Continuity

The *Mahabharata* has never existed as a completely fixed narrative. Its transmission across languages, regions, oral traditions and performance practices has produced numerous variations, making retelling an intrinsic part of its cultural history. A. K. Ramanujan's influential discussion of the multiple *Ramayanas*, although concerned with a different epic, provides a useful comparative framework: narratives acquire different meanings as they move between communities and historical contexts (Ramanujan, 1991). The same principle is visible in the *Mahabharata*, where characters and episodes are repeatedly reinterpreted according to changing cultural concerns.

This plurality is possible partly because the epic itself resists simple moral conclusions. Its central figures frequently occupy contradictory positions: Yudhiṣṭhira's commitment to *dharma* coexists with ethically troubling decisions, while Bhiṣma's wisdom is complicated by his failure to intervene against injustice. Draupadi, similarly, is simultaneously a wronged woman, queen, political actor and moral critic. Such ambiguity allows later writers to enter the epic from different perspectives without exhausting its possibilities.

Retelling, then, should not be understood merely as a departure from an authoritative original. It is a form of interpretation through which inherited narratives acquire contemporary significance. As Paula Richman's work on South Asian epic traditions demonstrates, retellings often reveal the social and ethical concerns of the communities that produce them (Richman, 1991). Contemporary versions of the *Mahabharata* participate in this longer tradition of variation. Their importance lies not in reproducing the epic unchanged but in demonstrating how continuity can operate through transformation.

4. Draupadi, Gendered Memory and Narrative Reclamation in *The Palace of Illusions*



Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) reworks the *Mahabharata* by placing Draupadi at the centre of its narrative. The significance of this choice lies not simply in giving a female character greater prominence, but in allowing the epic's events to be remembered through her consciousness. Episodes traditionally associated with dynastic conflict and male political authority acquire a more intimate dimension as Draupadi reflects upon desire, humiliation, loyalty and power.

The first-person narrative consequently alters the politics of cultural memory. Draupadi is no longer merely a figure remembered by others; she becomes the one who remembers. Her experiences in the Kuru court, her relationships with the Pandavas and her complex feelings toward Karna are transformed into sites of ethical and psychological reflection. Yet Divakaruni does not present her as an uncomplicated feminist heroine. Draupadi remains vulnerable to jealousy, anger and contradiction, which makes her perspective more human and prevents the retelling from replacing one fixed interpretation with another.

The novel therefore illustrates how cultural memory can be reshaped by changing the position from which a familiar story is narrated. Divakaruni retains the central narrative framework of the epic while questioning whose experiences receive authority within it. In this sense, *The Palace of Illusions* demonstrates continuity through reinterpretation: the inherited story survives, but its ethical centre shifts as a previously marginalised voice becomes its narrator.

5. *Jaya*: Plurality, Interpretation and the Transmission of Knowledge

Devdutt Pattanaik's *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata* (2010) approaches the epic differently from Divakaruni's psychologically centred narrative. Rather than reconstructing the story through one character's consciousness, Pattanaik presents a condensed narrative alongside explanations, illustrations and references to alternative traditions. The structure itself foregrounds plurality. The *Mahabharata* appears not as a single, closed account but as a narrative tradition containing different versions, interpretations and cultural memories.

This method is particularly relevant to the idea of knowledge transmission. Pattanaik's *Jaya* makes the epic accessible to contemporary readers while retaining concepts such as *dharma*, *karma*, duty and consequence. Stories become a means through which ethical ideas are communicated without being separated from narrative experience. In this respect, the book participates in the kind of knowledge transmission associated with the broader framework of IKS, where intellectual reflection can remain embedded in stories, symbols and interpretive practices.

At the same time, *Jaya* should not be treated as a neutral presentation of every existing tradition. Recent scholarship has noted that Pattanaik's emphasis on plurality can coexist with particular ideas about Indian culture and contemporary social values (Sharma, 2025). This tension is important. Cultural memory does not simply preserve everything from the past; it selects, arranges and gives particular meanings to what is remembered. *Jaya* therefore demonstrates both the possibilities and the limits of contemporary retelling.

6. Retelling as Cultural Continuity

Its significance ultimately lies in making plurality itself part of the reader's encounter with the epic. By placing different narrative possibilities alongside the principal story, Pattanaik reminds readers that the



Mahabharata has always been larger than any single retelling. The book consequently extends the epic's cultural life while also participating in the ongoing process through which inherited knowledge is interpreted for a new audience.

The two retellings reveal different dimensions of the *Mahabharata*'s continuing cultural life. Divakaruni changes the location of memory by allowing Draupadi to narrate, while Pattanaik foregrounds the plurality of narratives through which the epic has circulated. One moves inward, toward individual experience; the other moves outward, toward competing traditions. Yet both challenge the assumption that continuity requires repetition without change.

Their differences are therefore analytically productive. *The Palace of Illusions* demonstrates how cultural memory can be transformed by recovering a marginalised perspective, whereas *Jaya* demonstrates how memory can be expanded by acknowledging narrative variation. In both cases, inherited knowledge becomes meaningful through reinterpretation. The *Mahabharata* remains alive not because contemporary writers reproduce it exactly, but because they continue to find new questions within it.

This suggests a broader understanding of Indian Knowledge Systems as living traditions rather than museum-like collections of ancient ideas. When contemporary retellings reopen questions of *dharma*, gender, power, responsibility and cultural identity, they reactivate intellectual concerns embedded within the epic. Retelling consequently becomes an act of continuity: the past is neither abandoned nor preserved untouched, but carried forward in altered form.

7. Conclusion

The continuing presence of the *Mahabharata* in contemporary literature demonstrates that cultural continuity does not depend upon preserving a tradition in an unchanged form. Its survival has always involved reinterpretation, adaptation and renewed acts of remembering. Read through the framework of cultural memory and Indian Knowledge Systems, contemporary retellings become more than literary adaptations: they are sites where inherited ethical and intellectual questions are brought into conversation with the concerns of the present.

The Palace of Illusions and *Jaya* illustrate this process through markedly different strategies. Divakaruni reorients the epic around Draupadi's consciousness, making gendered experience and narrative authority central to the act of remembering. Pattanaik, meanwhile, emphasises plurality by bringing together different stories and interpretive traditions associated with the epic. One foregrounds the politics of voice; the other foregrounds the multiplicity of tradition. Both, nevertheless, demonstrate that the *Mahabharata* remains culturally productive precisely because it permits reinterpretation.

The significance of these retellings consequently extends beyond their immediate literary contexts. They show how inherited knowledge can remain relevant without being reduced to fixed doctrine. Questions of *dharma*, justice, responsibility, power and human conduct continue to acquire new meanings as the epic enters different cultural moments. In this sense, retelling becomes a form of cultural memory through which knowledge is not merely preserved but reactivated.



The *Mahabharata* therefore survives not as a relic of an inaccessible past but as a continuing conversation between generations. Its contemporary afterlives demonstrate that tradition is not necessarily opposed to change. Sometimes, indeed, change is the condition of tradition's survival.

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